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SUBJECT: THE REAL STRENGTH OF THE AK PARTY: ITS WOMEN

Classified By: Political Counselor John Kundstadter for reasons 1.4 (b, d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: AK Party's women provide the energy that fuels AKP's mighty grassroots machine. The women feel valued by the Party's leaders and they are particularly enamored with PM Erdogan. That they are being used by the men in the party is almost irrelevant--the women derive substantial social, psychological and, in some cases, economic benefits from their activity in the AK Party Women's Auxiliary. END SUMMARY.

The Auxiliary

2. (C) We have met with six different AK Party Women's Auxiliary groups: the National Headquarters, the Ankara and Sivas Provincial Headquarters, and three Ankara Sub-provincial Headquarters (Cubuk, Mamak, and Altindag). In every meeting male PolOff attended, male AK Party members were in the room or within earshot. In Sivas, despite men being present, Auxiliary President Suheyla Akkas was clearly in control and in charge of the meeting. In Cubuk, however, the male AK Party members dominated the meetings in spite of PolOffs' best efforts to engage the women. In all the other meetings with female PolOff, no men were present.

3. (C) The overall majority of women attending the meetings wore turban headscarves, but only one of the six chairwomen wore a turban. (Comment: the "turban" is a scarf tightly wrapped around the head and neck, made popular by political Islam-influenced women such as the PM's wife, Emine Erdogan. The turban is different than the traditional headscarf worn by many traditional and pious women. The turban is an indication that the wearer supports political Islam. End Comment.) In a Mamak meeting with male PolOff present, all but three of twelve women wore a turban. Later when only a female PolOff met with the group, five of seven were without a turban. (Comment: We suspect that AK Party's male leadership "prefers/encourages" the women's groups to "elect" uncovered chairwomen in order to create the image to outsiders that AK Party is a secular, non-Islamist party. End Comment.)

4. (C) The AK Party's Women's Auxiliary, according to National Director Selma Kavaf, is interested in educating and promoting women in politics. Kavaf also says the group does not want to be merely a fixture, but actually "contribute" to the party. She claims forty-six percent of the group's membership has some sort of post-high school degree or certificate and brazenly asserts that thirty-three percent of all Turkish women has an undergraduate degree. (Note: The rate is actually 10.6 percent, according to Turkish official statistics. End Note.)

5. (C) Because most Auxiliary members are new to politics, the Auxiliary conducts informative workshops on such issues as how politics work, democracy, lobbying, political history, economics, foreign relations, how to run a political meeting, and how to take minutes. Kavaf says that politics is not the only thing that people need to learn. She advocates more religious training country-wide because people "mistakenly blame religion (Islam) for lots of things."

6. (C) The AK Party is against instituting a quota system for female parliamentarians. Kavaf, too, is against it, arguing that if there was a quota, women would only be elected to satisfy the numbers. (Comment: In Turkey, with rare exception, parliamentary candidates are usually appointed by the party leadership, not by voters in party primaries. The party could adopt a gender quota for leadership positions (like the U.S. Republican and Democratic National Committees) or parliamentary candidate lists, but it does not. End Comment.)

The Real Workers in the Grassroots Machine

7. (C) The AK Party, drawing on an approach honed by its predecessor, the "Milli Gorus" political Islam movement of Necmettin Erbakan, is well known for its active women who get

out and garner the grassroots votes. Ankara's Mamak and Altindag neighborhoods are the poorest areas in the city. Women from both district AK Party Auxiliaries comb the neighborhoods looking for people and families who are in need of help and then providing that help, whether it be securing employment, obtaining medical care for the ill, outfitting children for school (such as buying clothes and school supplies, and even arranging free haircuts), handing out coal in the winter months, and delivering food to the hungry.

18. (C) The AK Party women also support social activities. Mamak Auxiliary President Nagehan Muyan said that she had decided that this year either she or someone on her staff would attend all the weddings in Mamak. Leyla Arik, President of the Altindag group, invited us to a potluck picnic at a local park--the group was securing bus service to and from the park for women and children from the neighborhood. She indicated that this was not the first and would not be the last function the Auxiliary plans.

19. (C) Realizing the importance of education, both the Mamak and Altindag Auxiliaries provide access for local women to literacy and child-rearing courses. There is great interest and high demand for the courses, says Muyan. Mamak Mayor Gazi Sahin has even attended the child-rearing course and took great delight in explaining to us how to diaper a baby.

110. (C) Behind (or above) this grassroots machine is usually a male foreman, i.e., the Provincial or Sub-Provincial Chairman. Though these chairmen seem to be supportive of the Women's Auxiliary, it is interesting to note that after meeting with the Women's Groups in Mamak, Cubuk, and Altindag, the men in the party knew the content of the meetings (even sitting in on the Cubuk meeting), evidenced by comments by Sub-Provincial Chairmen in each district to us. PolOff has tried several times to meet with Ankara's Yenimahalle Women's Auxiliary. One meeting was canceled because we had not seen the higher-ups yet. Requests for subsequent meetings were put off until just recently after Yenimahalle's AK Party Sub-Provincial Chairman, Hamdi Balaban, indicated that he had "approved" the meeting. This is further evidence that the men in AK Party have the real control over the Women's Auxiliaries.

Why They Love the Brave Hawk (Er-dogan)

111. (C) We have been struck by the absolute reverence of the party members for PM Erdogan. More than several asserted that the PM regards women very highly. Nagehan Muyan claimed the success of the AK Party comes from the top down. Seemingly star-struck Muyan gushed that PM Erdogan favors the Mamak district because he always comes there for the first breaking of the fast (iftar) during Ramadan. Nurdan Sanli, the Ankara Provincial President, and several of her board members were positively giddy as they tried to assert to us how the PM respects them and all women. (Note: Selma Kavaf has made the same assertion in every meeting with us.)

112. (C) The reason for this adoration of Erdogan is two-fold. First, Erdogan is a tall, dark, mustachioed and athletic (a former minor league soccer player): the epitome of Prince Charming in the minds of many women of Anatolian roots. Second, in addition to claiming to represent strong "family values" and "clean" (AK) government, Erdogan has delivered tangible policy benefits to women. For example, the AK government has mandated that welfare payments be paid directly to mothers, not to their husbands, who Erdogan himself has publicly accused of sometimes squandering the money in coffeehouses.

Who Are These Women Anyway?

113. (C) Selma Kavaf was re-elected as National Director of the AK Party Women's Branch at the AK Party Women's Convention in early May. She asserts that 25,000 people attended the convention, three-fourths of them women. Although not a founding member of her party, she claims to be a "believer" and touts the party verbiage.

114. (C) Kavaf hails from the southwestern city of Denizli, known for its more Aegean (Western) orientation and proximity to the calcified pools of Pamukkale, a popular tourist destination. She is a former "Turkology" teacher (Comment: A term Turkish language and literature teachers use. End Comment), married and has at least one teenage son, though she was not forthcoming in personal details. She did acknowledge, however, that although she was on the list of candidates for the November 2002 election, she was too low on the list of candidates from her district to win a parliamentary seat. (Comment: She ran in Denizli Province, which is entitled to seven seats in parliament. AK

Party men won four seats and CHP men won three. This means that not a single woman was on the top half of AK Party's list in Denizli. End Comment.) Mixing a dull bureaucratic style with a certain admonitory manner, she maintains a modest appearance, blandly dressed, no makeup, and does not wear a turban. Several contacts assert that Selma Kavaf is only the chairman of the Women's Auxiliary by virtue of her bare head. Sema Ramazanoglu, her sister, is rumored to be the real brains behind the operations, but because the party wants the Women's Auxiliary to put on a "good face" for secularists and Westerners, she was not elected (promoted).

15. (C) When we visited Sivas last fall, Suheyra Akkas was the acting chairwoman of the AK Party Women's Auxiliary for the Sivas Province. She is an intelligent, attractive, and ambitious young woman in her early twenties. She has long dark hair which she does not cover and wears stylish western clothing. She had recently graduated from law school, but--as with many college graduates--had been unable to find a job that fully utilized her talents. Her brother, however, is the chairman of the Sivas Provincial AK Party and she appeared to owe her position to his influence. She was polite and tried to sound modern, but she was not always successful in hiding her anger with U.S. foreign policy. Despite her western appearance, she harbored many of the same anti-American prejudices and conspiracy theories that we hear all too often from AK Party members. (Comment: It should be noted that this meeting took place during the height of anti-American sentiment in the fall of 2004 and occurred during the same week an American NBC television crew caught video of an American marine shooting a wounded Iraqi in a mosque in Fallujah. This NBC video received extensive coverage in Turkey. End Comment.)

16. (C) Leyla Arik, Altindag Women's Auxiliary President, is a young, pretty turban-wearing woman who grew up in poor Ankara neighborhood of Altindag. She is newly married, having met her husband at their place of employment--a local grocery store. A high school grad, she is intelligent and well-spoken. This is her first foray into the world of politics. She admitted that she has a lot to learn about politics and the running of a political party, but claimed that higher-ups in the Women's Auxiliary supported her. Although she is much younger than the women on the Altindag board, it was evident that she is respected by her sisters.

The Votes are In the Bag

17. (C) COMMENT: For many Turkish women, especially those from pious families inclined to vote AK Party, membership in the Women's Auxiliary provides a socially-acceptable opportunity to get out of the house, interact with peers, and engage in a type of work the women find morally and psychologically satisfying.

18. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: The AK Party Women's Auxiliary officers and regular members are happy to be working for the AK Party. For most of the women, this is their first experience working in/for a political party. All the women we talked to feel they are making a difference in their districts. The women have convinced themselves that PM Erdogan realizes their importance and actually listens to them. Whether PM Erdogan (or any other man in AK Party) does truly acknowledge and value these women or the Women's Auxiliary is a separate issue; the perception that he does is enough for these women. In other words, although we have seen evidence throughout the country that the Women's Auxiliary is being exploited by the men running the party, the women assert they do not see it that way and they themselves derive social, psychological, and, in some cases, economic benefits from membership in the AK Party Women's Auxiliary. The AK Party women reach out and offer palpable help to the voters--something we have not seen other parties do. As long as the benefaction continues and opposition parties do not wise up and implement similar door-to-door strategies, the AK Party women will continue to secure the votes. END COMMENT.
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